

GOSHEN COLLEGE COMMENTS

Art DeFehr

October 8, 2011

A Canadian newspaper once published an article entitled “Art DeFehr. The FBI’s gift to the Furniture Industry.” There is a Goshen College story behind that unusual headline.

I arrived in Goshen fall of 1964 with a Business degree in hand. I also had a confirmed appointment to the Canadian diplomatic Service. I felt my Business degree was too restrictive and asked for a one year deferral from the Government and came to Goshen. Since I did not need another degree I followed the advice of my Mennonite mother who herself had earned three University degrees in the thirties – “Don’t take courses – take good professors.”

That was my strategy and the Professors and courses ranged from a first year Arts course by Mary Oyer, Debate, Readings in Economics with Carl Kreider, and theology with John Howard Yoder. I took a severe overload and had a great year. My church and private high school background had not convinced me of the rational for a Pacifist belief. I was told that the best person to guide me on that question would be Prof Clarence Baumann of Elkhart Seminary who happened to be on sabbatical. I knocked on his door to explain my objective and he arranged for me to read several books during the week and then we would discuss them each Saturday morning. As graduation approached the Dean noted that I had credits well beyond the requirements and wanted to grant me a degree – so we agreed to name it Economics.

The social side was interesting with the girls being locked away at 10 o’clock. With a key to the back door of the seminary library I had a strategy of focusing on social activities until 10, then entering the abandoned seminary by the back door to study until 300 AM and avoid all courses that started at 830. My friends had the view that I never studied.

The impact of Goshen was most critical in areas beyond academics. Living in a Mennonite Community in Canada my experience with people of color was very limited. I became good friends with a student from Nigeria and had an interesting relationship with a student named Jan from Chicago. I asked her for a valentine date and finally realized that she would not be allowed to enter the place I had arranged for the date. More important, the mid-sixties featured the civil-rights period and I had the privilege of joining the Selma-Montgomery March together with a carload of Goshen students. I became friends with another Jan – in this case the daughter of Clarence Jordan the founder of Koinonia Farms and joined her for a school break at Koinonia. On a later visit I would meet and become lifelong friends with Millard Fuller of Habitat for Humanity – we walked into poor homes in the south 10 years before he started Habitat. He would play an influential role in shaping my direction in later years. This was the

year of the election between Goldwater and Johnson and I participated actively. VietNam was coming into view and I was on the streets when the first troops flew over.

Just prior to graduation I received a letter from the Government of Canada that I no longer qualified for a diplomatic position. The only information they provided was that they had done a security check. The Dean duly confirmed they had been on campus and that ended one career path. Possibly God was leading in ways that we only see with hindsight. Plan B was to go to Harvard where I earned an MBA. That explains how I became involved in business and the headline.

Leona and I were married the summer after Goshen. After graduation from Harvard we shared the dream of international service and work. We made a commitment that we would not stay in business more than 5 years to avoid becoming inflexible and unable to shift careers. In mysterious ways I started my role as Director of MCC Bangladesh 5 years to the week after my Harvard graduation.

Bangladesh was the beginning of a wonderful adventure. Both Leona and I learned that we could function in a challenging environment. Although the MCC work focused on agriculture I extended my interest into other areas particularly refugees and human rights.

A whole series of assignments and interventions followed. The experience of famine in Bangladesh led to the formation of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Then came the boat people situation which led to the refugee sponsorship program in Canada which is still an active and successful program. My activity in the region led to a leadership role on the Cambodian border at the end of the Pol Pot period. This led to a request from the United Nations to head their Somalia program which was in great difficulty. Those were interesting times with all of the tribal politics, African politics, UN politics and cold war politics. My involvement in the region continued with the famine in Ethiopia and then Sudan.

At that stage I returned to spend more time with the company – I had actually been moving back and forth between these assignments and my role in the family company. In 1989 I became engaged in the Soviet Union and its period of change. Together with MEDA we formed SUN or Soviet Union Network to organize Soviet Union wide conferences on Business and Ethics – amazing events. This led to a variety of projects from Lithuania Christian College to the publishing of Bibles, a large Christian Camping Ministry and the production of high-tech farm equipment in Siberia. There were some exciting moments such as spending the last night of the 1991 Soviet coup inside the barricades with Yeltsin and company.

Recent years have focused on immigration policy and international Peace issues.

God has been very good to us. The business has provided the resources to operate independent of the need for a salary and gave me an unusual degree of independence. The combination of Business and senior international posts made me a person of interest to certain groups and allowed me entry into international forums where neither my business nor an international career alone would have done that. This included membership in the World Economic Forum known better as Davos, The Trilateral Commission and various senior business groups.

My year at Goshen was not the basis for all of my interests or activities but it was a critical shaping event and altered my trajectory by exposing me very directly to the major societal issues of the time. Goshen also contributed to the foundation of values and worldview that make my interventions a little different than many others. Along the way I was blessed with an incredible life partner who shared all of the adventures with me – and I can assure you that the sun did not shine on every day! Bangladesh resulted in the formation of our family – we adopted two daughters and the oldest Shanti is a grad of Goshen. She married Dan Nussbaum of Ohio and went on to earn a Masters at the London School of Economics. The second daughter Tara is a grad of Eastern Mennonite and married a young man she met in Lithuania as part of our family adventure in the Soviet Union. Our four grandchildren were born in three different countries and between them carry 8 passports.

This reflects the world in which we now live. We are grateful to God for blessing us so richly. I am also grateful for my experience at Goshen College and for the critical role it played in the trajectory of my life.